

Organizing Anarchy: The Forgotten Zine Archive

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Abstract

Specialist information archives, particularly in subcultural and non-institutional settings, present special considerations of local context, cultural appropriateness and use patterns. In this poster, we describe our work developing a system of classification, cataloging, and preservation measures in the context of Seomra Spraoi's Forgotten Zine Archive, a Dublin, Ireland-based collection of underrepresented and ephemeral cultural materials. The goal of organizing and preserving these materials was achieved without compromising the noncommercial, do-it-yourself ethos of the materials and organization. Our actions contributed structure and method to a previously undervalued information domain, which may become important in the future as the cultural resonance of alternative media and zines in particular becomes more widely acknowledged. To develop these systems, key aspects of the Forgotten Zine Archive were examined via a detailed user needs assessment questionnaire and approximately 3? months of weekly participant observation sessions. The survey and observational data, viewed through lenses of existing theory and archival practices, were used to ground any practical decisions made. The collection of over 1800 zines was then classified and cataloged based on this knowledge. Issues of preservation and digitization were also extensively considered. Once our field work was done at Seomra, we developed a set of more generalizable considerations, contributing to existing best practices in the domain of subcultural archiving. Through working with the Forgotten Zine Archive, we generated a set of conclusions and best practice suggestions, with potential benefit to any group, academic or otherwise, that wishes to undertake the maintenance of a similarly ephemeral collection. Catering the cataloging process to the audience and setting is vital when dealing with alternate media, and one effective way to approach this task has been established through this project.

Keywords: non-standard information settings, sub-culture collections, DIY archives, zines

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1 Introduction

As the historical value of fanzines and other independent, subcultural and self-published publications receive greater and greater acknowledgment, so too are established memory institutions taking further steps towards preserving such ephemeral materials. Wary of this potential institutionalization, however, many zine publishers and underground community members have taken it upon themselves to establish rival collections of their own. In doing so, these do-it-yourself, independent libraries preserve the original cultural ethos of their publications while also striving to avoid perceived compromises or sacrificing of integrity. The independent libraries first-hand experience of zines affords the items a special significance and they are unlikely to go overlooked as a result. Despite this, however, the nature of independent work may lead to uncommon access or preservational issues which would otherwise not be encountered if they were in established institutions.

This poster builds on Andrew Flinn’s idea of “archival activism” (2011), or DIY archives, by utilizing the specific case of the Forgotten Zine archive - an independently maintained ephemera collection housed in Dublin, Ireland. We will use this setting as a case study to illustrate some of the potential challenges and opportunities inherent in many such unconventional collections, in particular focusing on how established institutions should work with these groups rather than absorb their collections. For example, independent publications such as zines often do not provide consistent and clear publication metadata, which can lead to unique challenges for accurate classification. Additionally, unique constraints related to the physical setting of these archives needs to be considered. For example, the Forgotten Zine Archive is housed in an autonomous social center, as opposed to a standard library setting, which can put the collection at risk during center-wide social events such as regular café hours, film screenings, talks, workshops and late-night music gigs.

2 Background

Zines (short for “fanzines”) are usually defined as independent publications created by the members of a particular subcultural movement or “scene” and have been historically overlooked by the mainstream media. Because zines are generally created by figures central to a scene, they are often used as a primary source for mapping the development of those subcultures. Cohen and Lashua (2012) demonstrated this in their research on *Merseysound*, the postpunk zine from Liverpool, England. *Merseysound* is an example of how scenes can be influenced by their independent publications. “They provide a record of local punk and postpunk scenes, but they were also active agents within those scenes, helping to create the groups, identities, and ideologies involved” (Cohen and Lashua, 2012).

There have been many non-institutional archives that have evolved to cater to the niche audiences of a given local social context or scene. Archival researchers have suggested this may have resulted from fringe cultural groups being overlooked by mainstream collections, as well as a perception of such material as being too controversial (Flinn, 2011). Many of those involved also have reason to be suspicious of established institutions, having been marginalized for so long, and some hostility may remain. Subcultures may also have concerns about potentially leaking insider or incriminating information; as Lingel et al. examine in “Practices of information and secrecy in a punk rock subculture,” many subcultures still have secrecy veils to keep outsiders outside (2012). Lingel et al. illustrates these veils within the context of a particular musical subculture, in which the concerts themselves are illegal (due to non-regulation venues and fire hazards) and many of the activities at the concerts can also be considered illicit (such as underage drinking and drug use). As a result, the locational information of these events is considered sensitive and if any of this information was advertised in a zine, as it historically often was, that information would then be public and the secrecy of the group may end up compromised.

Created in 2004 by prominent Irish zine writer Ciarán Walsh, the Forgotten Zine Archive was started to create a functional Irish zine collection. It was made up of around 1,200 zines, donated by four separate collectors, and was a mixture of Irish and international zines in. It was stored in a commercial warehouse space in Dublin’s North Strand which was being used semi-legally as a residential space by members of the Dublin punk, DIY, and independent scenes. The archive was initially opened for a few hours every Sunday, but when the warehouse closed in 2005, the archive was forced to look for a new home. This home was found in Seomra Spraoi, a non-hierarchical, anti-capitalist non-profit social center which has since housed the archive in various locations across the city.

The housing of the Forgotten Zine Archive in a social center such as Seomra Spraoi, and not in an academic setting, presented some unique challenges that had to be addressed. There were tension between traditional information organization and the ethos of the Forgotten Zine Archive and Seomra Spraoi and this manifested itself in the areas of access, cataloging, and preservation.

3 Approach/Methods

Seomra had a policy of open access to the zines. As the zines are not locked, and there is no security in the building, items could have easily been taken from the archive without anyone being aware. Whilst Seomra's culture of openness has to be respected, it was evident that greater protection of the zines would be beneficial to the archive. When we began cataloging the archive, the culture of Seomra Spraoi was very important to take into consideration. An over-authoritarian cataloging system would not be in line with the nature of the establishment the archive was being stored in, nor with the culture of the people who would use it. Finally, finding a cost-effective method to preserve ephemera such as zines was a major challenge. As Seomra is a noncommercial space run on a not-for-profit basis, there were minimal funds allocated to preserving the zines. The Forgotten Zine Archive needed to be preserved more carefully than it had been, but given the financial situation Seomra was in, there were no funds available to do so.

Over five weeks during the summer, the entire Forgotten Zine Archive has been successfully classified using the four designated headings (Artistic & Creative, Music, Political & Social and Resources), alphabetized, labeled, and cataloged using LibraryThing. A basic, and "user-friendly" approach to cataloging was adopted, with a classification system that is intuitive to use. The collection has been re-boxed, and each zine has been placed in a polyester sleeve with an acid-free cardboard backing for support and protection, both of which are vital for the preservation of ephemeral items. A finding aid was created, so that users who are browsing the archive in person may find specific zines easily, particularly those who may not have access to the online LibraryThing catalog at that time. The collection has been promoted via social media such as blogging, Twitter, and Facebook, giving the Forgotten Zine Archive an online presence it never had before. These combined have significantly increased awareness of the archive, and the enthusiasm of both potential and current users. Finally, the process of digitizing the collection has been examined; the ethical issues surrounding the digitization of ephemera such as zines have led to the recommendation that institutions consider carefully the implications of complete online replication of items.

4 Conclusion

Issues of access, cataloging methods, preservation, target audiences, and digitization are nothing new to information professionals. When dealing with alternative media, however, they take on a different tone. The ethos and nature of the zine community is almost one of deliberate disorganization and rebellion, so to try to create a collection of these items while keeping this ethos in mind is fraught with challenges. This does not delegitimize the process though, as Anderson (1999) states, "[u]nless aggressively pursued, librarians would be fortunate to be aware of even 10 percent [sic] of the publishers publishing today. The other 90 percent [sic] remain obscure." If we disregard zines and their importance simply because they are difficult to categorize or maintain, that 90 per cent may remain obscure for the foreseeable future. The purpose of this study was to develop a system for maintaining unique or specialist collections, and to preserve underrepresented and ephemeral materials before they are lost. The best practices outlined in our poster - ethos-oriented access policies, culturally sensitive user-driven classification, and accessible cataloging and record-keeping practices - contribute to the broader endeavor of developing cultural archives in similar nonacademic settings

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